ISSUE

INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH
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MINISTRY ENCOURAGES RESEARCHERS

TO STUDY ENVIRONMENTAL HYPERSENSITIVITY

ISSUE

. Ministry response to the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Environmental Hypersensitivity Disorders, chaired by former Judge George M. Thomson (September 1985).

BACKGROUND

. On December 19, 1986, following Ministry review of the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Environmental Hypersensitivity Disorders and the Report of the Advisory Panel on Environmental Hypersensitivity (September 1986), the Minister made an announcement encouraging the research community to submit proposals for studies to define the nature, diagnosis and treatment of environmental hypersensitivity disorders. Two research proposals were submitted for the April 1987 deadline; both were not recommended for funding. One of these proposals was revised and re-submitted for the November 1987 deadline and rejected a second time.

. Representatives of the Human Ecology Foundation, an advocacy group for the environmentally hypersensitive, met with the Minister of Health on July 30, 1987 to discuss Ministry response to the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee.

The Ad Hoc Committee

. The Ad Hoc Committee on Environmental Hypersensitivity Disorders was appointed in November 1984 to advise the Ministry on the state of knowledge, occurrence in the population, methods of diagnosis and treatment and hypersensitivity issues requiring further investigation.

. The committee included five specialists in medicine and nutrition. The report of the committee was submitted to the Ministry on September 9, 1985 and released publicly in December 1985.

. In January 1986, the Minister asked the Hospital for Sick Children to convene an advisory panel to review the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee and to assess the impact of the recommendations on the health system. The panel was chaired by Dr. Barry Zimmerman, Chief, Allergy Division, Department of Paediatrics.

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. Both the Ad Hoc Committee and the Advisory Panel recommended that research be undertaken to increase understanding of the nature of environmental hypersensitivities. Both reports are available free of charge from the Health Information Centre, Ministry of Health.

Conclusion and Recommendations of the Report

. The major conclusion of the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee is that environmental hypersensitivity disorders may exist, but that research is needed to define the nature of the condition and the extent of the problem, i.e., the epidemiology of environmental hypersensitivity.

. The Recommendations concern the research that is required and the assistance needed by those who currently attribute their ill health and disability to such disorders.

Environmental Hypersensitivity Disorders

. Environmental hypersensitivity disorders are described as multiple sensitivities to a wide range of foods, chemicals and environmental substances experienced by some individuals.

. Symptoms reported as environmental sensitivities can be physical complaints, rashes, headaches, weakness, fatigue and nausea, and can include changes in behaviour, loss of memory, fits of rage or depression. The diagnosis and effective treatment have not been recognized by medical authorities.

. In recent years a few medical practitioners have chosen to specialize in treating symptoms believed to be related to environmental exposures. They refer to their field of practise as clinical ecology. The clinical ecology movement began in Chicago in the 1940s. It is estimated that there are 15 physicians practising as clinical ecologists in Ontario.

. The Ontario Medical Association does not recognize clinical ecology as a field of practise.

Insured Benefits

. OHIP covers the costs of medical consultation, hospitalization and ambulance transportation. OHIP covers the diagnostic tests and treatments in the approved Schedule of Benefits. Hospital care outside the province is covered if the facilities patients require are not available here. A number of Ontario patients were referred to the controlled environment unit at the Northeast Community Hospital in New Bedford, Texas prior to the closing of the unit in February 1987. Currently, there are no known units in North America.

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CURRENT STATUS

- On May 17, the Minister requested that a concerted effort be made to contact established researchers regarding their interest in undertaking studies on environmental hypersensitivity. By June 28 commitment was obtained from five researchers to submit formal proposals by the first week in September. In addition, two researchers expressed interest in exploring possibilities for undertaking research and will submit letters of intent.

- The proposed research concerns the diagnosis of food and chemical sensitivities, including the development of a physical assessment protocol, the effects of prescribed rotation diets on eating behaviour, and three modalities for treating sensitivities. The research would be conducted over three years with annual reporting.

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